# May Day: America's traditional, radical, complicated holiday, Part 2

By Jordan Grant April 29, 2016

TO-NIGHT, at 7.30 o'clock,
AT THE
HAYMARKET, Randolph St., Bet. Desplaines and Halsted.
Good Speakers will be present to denounce the latest atrocious act of the police, the shooting of our fellow-workmen yesterday afternoon.
THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.
Achtung Arbeiter!
Große
Massen-Versammlung
Heute Abend, halb 8 Uhr, auf dem

Feedback

*This post is part two in a series. Part one <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/may-day-americas-traditional-radical-complicated-holiday-part-1> traced how the holiday of May Day was revived in the United States by wealthy reformers who were concerned about how*

*working class Americans spent their leisure time. Below, part two continues the story, showing how a contemporaneous group of reformers — labor leaders — tried to redefine May 1 as a holiday where America's workers could agitate for better treatment and working conditions.*

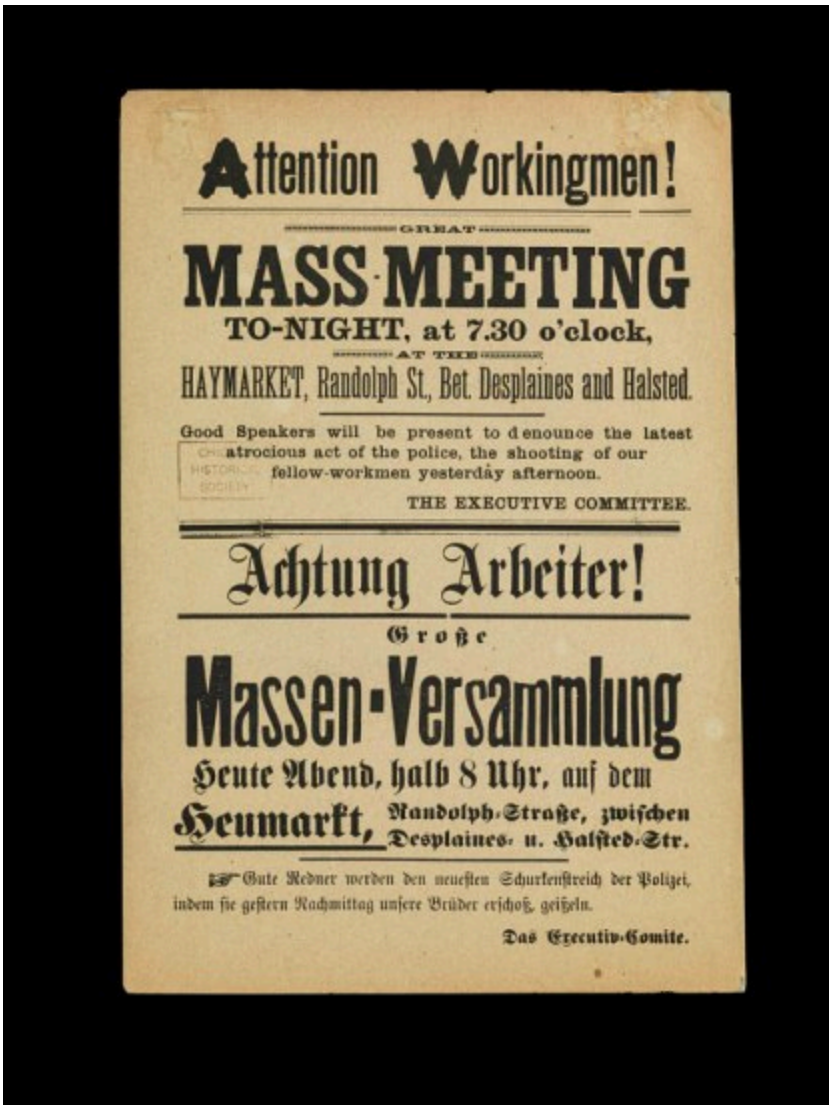
At the same time as elite reformers were busy resurrecting May Day's traditional past <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/may-day-americas-traditional-radical-complicated-holiday-part-1>, labor leaders from the nation's working classes were trying to redefine May 1 as a holiday set aside for the American laborer. When industrialization took off in the late 1800s after the Civil War, workers organized into unions and joined pro-labor organizations in order to gain bargaining power, elect sympathetic politicians, and generally protect their interests. One of the earliest rallying points for labor organizations was the fight for the eight- hour work day. In the 1880s most workers still worked a daily shift of 10 or more hours, six days a week (or half a day on Saturday).

May Day Parade, New York, 1910. Courtesy of Bain Collection, Library of Congress, LOT 10876-3.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001704480/>

In Chicago, 44 unions took to the streets on May 1, 1867, to celebrate the passage of an eight-hour workday law in Illinois. The next day, thousands of workers struck, staying home from work in an act of solidarity.  Although the 1867 law was never enforced, the city's workers preserved the memory of their predecessors' short-lived victory. Years later, at its 1885 convention, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Assemblies (a predecessor to the American Federation of Labor, or AFL) selected May 1, 1886, as the date for a universal strike to press for an eight-hour workday. According to the historian Donna T. Haverty-Stacke, labor leaders' decision to stage their protest on May 1, 1886, probably had little to do with the May Day's significance as a spring holiday. Instead, leaders at the time associated the day with Chicago's earlier protests in 1867 and, even more directly, the fact that May 1 was traditionally when union contracts and housing leases expired in U.S. cities.

On May 1, 1886, more than 30,000 Chicago workers struck. Unions and labor organizations from the across the political spectrum organized parades and mass meetings, and workers in other industrialized cities like New York and Cincinnati took up the cause, marching in the streets to draw public attention to their demands and convince other laborers to join the fight.



Attention Workingmen!

GREAT

MASS MEETING

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Heumarkt, Randolph-Straße, zwischen Desplaines- u. Halsted-Str.

☞Gute Redner werden den neuesten Schurkenstreich der Polizei, indem sie gestern Nachmittag unsere Brüder erschoß, geißeln.

Das Executiv-Comite.

Broadside announcing mass meeting in Haymarket Square, 1886. 1994.0082.03.

Unfortunately, the triumphs that workers celebrated on May Day 1886 were quickly overshadowed by violence. On May 3, members of the Chicago police fired at a group of striking workers at a McCormick reaper plant, killing at least two. The next day, when laborers staged a protest meeting in Haymarket Square, a protester hurled a bomb at the police, killing one and injuring dozens more. For many Americans at the time, the "Haymarket incident" and the contentious public trials that followed sullied

May 1, forever tying the day to anarchists, socialists, and other "radical" groups that stood outside the mainstream of American society.

"The Anarchist Riot in Chicago," Harper's Weekly, May 15, 1886. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

In 1889, just as public opinion about May Day within the United States was shifting, the labor holiday went international. When the International Socialist Congress met in France that year, its members adopted a resolution to hold a "great international demonstration" on May 1, 1890, to coincide with protests that had already been scheduled by the AFL. Their resolution sparked a series of demonstrations across Europe. In the years that followed, European workers embraced May 1 wholeheartedly—so much so that by the end of the century most Americans associated May Day with international socialism rather than the homegrown

unionism that had set the holiday in motion. Wary of any association with radicalism, more conservative unions in the U.S. dropped the May 1 holiday entirely in favor of celebrating Labor Day <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/2012/08/the-making-of-labor-day.html> in early September.

The meaning of May Day in the United States continued to change throughout the 1900s. In Hawaii, Lei Day was made an official state holiday in 1929, combining May 1st's established association flowers with Hawaii's traditions surrounding the lei. “May Day is Lei Day” advertisement. N. W. Ayer Advertising Agency Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History. AC0618.004.0000955.

In the early 1900s, it may have appeared that the nation's wealthy reformers had won the day. Traditional maypole celebrations were a common May Day attraction in the nation's colleges and schools, while militant protests and strikes were only pursued by socialists, communists, and the most militant unions. Viewed with hindsight, however, the elites' victory seems far less assured. While countless Americans did (and continue to <https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/journey/mayday.html>) celebrate May Day in the traditional English style, it would be quite a stretch to say that these festivities displaced any of the popular amusements that so worried genteel intellectuals. And while the significance of May Day as a labor holiday dimmed in the United States, that celebratory energy has been more than replaced by the millions of workers who continue to make the first of May International Workers' Day. In the case of American workers, the loss of May Day did not end the struggle for better treatment. Laborers continued to strike, march, and celebrate—just on different days of the year.

*Did you grow up celebrating May Day? We'd love to hear about your experiences. Sound off in the comments below or send us a message on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram!*

***Jordan Grant is a New Media assistant working with the American Enterprise exhibition** <https://americanhistory.si.edu/american-enterprise>**, located in the Mars Hall of American Business.***

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